

Gorbachev Denies That an Ultimatum Has Been Issued to Lithuania



Reuters

A couple in Vilnius huddled around a small radio during a broadcast address on Saturday by Vytautas Landsbergis, the new President of Lithuania, on the country's relations with the Soviet Union.

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

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MOSCOW, March 18 — President Mikhail S. Gorbachev denied today that any "ultimatum" had been issued to Lithuania to end its program of reclaiming independence from the Soviet Union.

"There was no ultimatum," he said, answering questions at a Moscow voting booth at the close of a weekend of rumors and speculation about imminent confrontation between the Kremlin and Lithuanian separatist leaders.

Mr. Gorbachev notified Lithuania on Friday that he expected a reply by Monday to the Soviet Congress's demand that the independence movement be ended. Lithuanian officials already have indicated their reply will be negative.

"We shall act responsibly with a view to realizing the aspirations of the Lithuanian people from the standpoint of strengthening their independence and sovereignty, but at the same time within the scope of cooperation with all the republics," he said. He thus continued to treat the issue as a question of seeking secession, in which the entire Soviet nation must have a say, and not restoring independence 50 years after the republic's forced annexation.

Lithuania declared its independence on March 11, but the Soviet Congress on Thursday declared the move illegal. On Saturday, Lithuania issued an appeal for international recognition, which it has yet to receive. The Bush Administration, for one, has urged Moscow to respect Lithuania's decision, but stopped short of an explicit statement of recognition.

Public Relations to Fore

Rather than seeking confrontation, both sides seem more intent on attending to the public relations aspects of

their standoff. Mr. Gorbachev at the voters' booth and Lithuanian officials through a busy, well-developed information agency.

The Lithuanian authorities were pointing today to Soviet troop movements in the republic without, however, accusing the Kremlin of trying to use force to settle the issue, something the Gorbachev Government previously renounced.

Statements from both capitals have sounded more accommodating in the last few days, with Vytautas Landsbergis, the new President of Lithuania, de-

Moscow wants the Soviet nation to have a say.

clarling, "The republic of Lithuania will no doubt take account of well defined and justified interests of the Soviet union."

Mr. Gorbachev, in turn, again offered "dialogue" with the Lithuanian leadership but not the independence negotiations Vilnius is seeking.

The Lithuanians hope to read their reply to the Soviet Congress on Monday here at a meeting of the Supreme Soviet.

Mr. Gorbachev said that "everything else will become clear" from the reply, which "will determine our subsequent steps." His comments on the issue have settled into a clear pattern alternating between conciliation and denunciation.